

WENTWORTH, "LONG JOHN"

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Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

“Long John” Wentworth

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"LONG JOHN" WENTWORTH

from Chicago Historical Society October 1913

Called Chicago's most colorful pioneer, six feet six inches of Yankee brawn and brains, a man of quick wit and rugged honesty, "Long John" Wentworth arrived in Chicago on October 25, 1836, at the age of twenty-one. Within a month he was editor of the Chicago Democrat - the city's first newspaper and one destined to become the most influential in the Northwest under the proprietorship of this man. Mr. Wentworth was one of the most popular men in the State and began to serve his seven terms as Congressman when only twenty-eight years old. After his return to Chicago, he was elected mayor and served two terms.

The Chicago Historical Society has just been made the recipient of three valuable letters, believed to have been the first written by Mr. Wentworth following his arrival in Chicago. They are the gift of his grand-nephew, Mr. John Wentworth of Chicago. These letters will be published concurrently in the News Review. Two letters, of November 9 and 10th, 1836, tell of his experiences en-route to Chicago and of his impressions of this youthful city.

In his letter of October 6, 1838, "Long John" tells of a visit to Warrenville and Naperville, and of his entertainment while there. In describing his dinner, which was bounteous, he speaks of having tomatoes - "an article resembling in size and color the red pepper but not in taste."

The first letter written to his sister, Miss Lydia Wentworth of Sandwich, New Hampshire - follows herewith:

Chicago, Ill., Nov. 9th, 1836

Dear Sister

The last I wrote home, I was at White Pigeon, Michigan, on my tour to this city. Imagine to yourself what a seige this must have been. We set out from Detroit on thursday about noon in a snowstorm, or rather, what is worse, half snow and half rain, and only went twelve miles that P.M. such was the bad state of the roads. Not a stone, but all mud and clay beyond description bad. Never in all my life before did I see such roads. We had no coach, but a long and narrow cart with seats in it. The next morning we set out at 3 o'clock and such was the condition of the roads that we had to go afoot for twelve miles. We had gone about 2 miles, when the driver called after us and said his carriage had broken down. There we were, up to the top our boots in the mud, and what to do we knew not, but at length we espied a log cabin not far distant and we went to it and awakened the inhabitants. There we remained until daylight, when I flung my valise over my shoulder and set out with the other passengers. And we had got over the twelve miles and we were taking dinner, when the cart came up. We here jumped in and never stopped for rest until we arrived at Michigan City upon the southeast corner of Lake Michigan upon the northern boundary of the state of Indiana. To describe to you the roads, sometimes as beautiful as man could wish, sometimes bad enough to have been created by the infernal devil himself, the different landscapes, the various manners of the inhabitants, the flat and rolling prairies, the living of the people, the Indians, or even my own feelings after riding from Friday morn at 3 o'clock to Monday at 9 P.M. I have not time. I could sleep none, if I fell asleep it was only to bump my head against the coach (for we had coaches at different times for about one fourth of the way) or run the risk of falling out of the cart. If I left the stage I could get aboard no other as they were always full, never being allowed to take but eight passengers.

Three of us left and went to bed. Never before did I realize the advantages of sleep. In the morning we arose with spirits as bouyant as ever determined to foot it for the other sixty miles. We found a waggon and three men going to Chicago and we put our baggage aboard and kept up with them. We went twenty miles that day to what is called the Beach House a log cabin 9 miles from any other habitation, close to the Lake Shore. One room was the Ladies cabin and Ladies lodging room and the other was the Bar Room or gentlemen's lodging room. In that small room only 23 lodged that night. The beds were fixed in the manner of births on board a steamboat, one above another - 3 tiers. Whilst here and hearing them tell about a compass, caps and clothing coming on shore, I felt to congratulate myself that I chose the land. For supper and lodging here, we paid 50 cents and went ahead 9 miles to breakfast. On our journey we saw a large

schooner that had been washed on shore with her whole crew and completely wrecked. This day we went 28 miles. The next day at noon, thursday, we were in Chicago and whom should I meet for the first person but an old acquaintance and schoolmate a Mr. Molony of Northfield. By lodging with him I got into a good house here, otherwise I know not what I should have done. For the taverns are all full here. One of my class mates is also here in the study of Law. A young man who once boarded at Esq. Simpson's and well rememberes you is in trade here. He then drove stage. His name is Baily French. John A. Rollins has a son here. Horatio Will of Concord arrived last night and leaves tomorrow morning for the south as far as St. Louis when he will take the Ohio River to Cincinnati and thence by the most direct means home. Forty miles of my journey to this place was on the beach of the lake shore. It was hard travelling but the only road for foot passengers or the stage. At Niles, 200 miles from Detroit, on my road, in a fine little village, I found Peabody Martin of New Hampton. He was clerk in a store there. Enquired for you and Jane and Lydia. Could I but rehearse to some of the people in Sandwich, the sufferings, trials and misfortunes that I have witnessed a hundred times over in emigrants, they would remain at home and be willing to dig hard for even a competency. One generation can never reap the advantages of emigration, and why put oneself to such trouble to get away from society meetings and schools in order that children may come up wealthy in ignorance. To be continued the first opportunity. -

I am your Brother, John Wentworth.



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